

US intensifies pressure on Iraqi government to meet “benchmarks”

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A procession of top-ranking US political and military figures have flown into Iraq over the past week to pressure Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to meet the so-called benchmarks that Washington has set for the puppet government in Baghdad. Defence Secretary Robert Gates made an unannounced visit last Friday, following meetings with Maliki by Admiral William Fallon, the commander of US forces in the Middle East, and Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte, who served as US ambassador in Iraq from 2004 to 2005.

Gates arrived just days after the Al-Askariya mosque, one of most revered Shiite shrines, was severely damaged by alleged Sunni Muslim extremists linked to Al Qaeda. A previous bombing of the mosque in February 2006 triggered a frenzy of violence between rival Shiite and Sunni militias, which had been fermenting since the US invasion in 2003 ousted the Sunni-dominated regime of Saddam Hussein. Thousands of Iraqis have been killed over the past year and close to two million have been forced from their homes in the greatest refugee crisis in the Middle East since the Zionist ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in 1948.

Alongside the anti-occupation insurgency, the sectarian civil war raging in Baghdad and other parts of Iraq has prevented the Bush administration from securing its domination over the country. Despite the deployment of close to 30,000 additional troops over the past four months, attacks on American forces have not decreased and at least 100 Iraqi civilians lose their lives every day. US commanders have admitted they control just 40 percent of Baghdad. The Iraq invasion has become a quagmire, stretching the US military to breaking point, costing hundreds of billions of dollars and generating widespread opposition in the US.

The message that Gates brought to Maliki was that

the Bush administration wants successes that it can present to an increasingly hostile American population. He told a press conference: “Frankly, we’re disappointed with the progress so far and we hope that this most recent bombing by Al Qaeda won’t further disrupt or delay the process.”

One sign that an orchestrated campaign is underway are the comments last Friday of Australian Prime Minister John Howard, one of the few remaining staunch defenders of the Iraq war. “I’m still quite unhappy with the reconciliation process inside Iraq,” Howard declared. “The Maliki government should be doing more on that. They should be doing a lot more... I made that clear when I saw him three months ago, and Bush makes that clear to him every week.”

Washington is insisting that Maliki’s government, which is dominated by Shiite fundamentalist and Kurdish nationalist parties, pursue a policy of “reconciliation” with the predominantly Sunni supporters of the former Baathist regime. Ex-Baathists play a major role in the guerilla war being fought against US forces. The hope in the White House and Pentagon is that a range of political and economic overtures to the Sunni elites will effectively end the insurgency.

“Reconciliation” has several components. Firstly, the Bush administration wants the parliament to repeal the “de-Baathification” laws it imposed on Iraq in 2003, which prevent thousands of leading Baathists from holding positions in the state apparatus or the new armed forces. Secondly, it wants provincial elections that would enable the rehabilitated Baathist elite to gain power in majority Sunni provinces. Finally, it wants legislation to guarantee Sunni provinces a substantial share of the revenues that will be derived from the exploitation of Iraq’s vast oil reserves.

The bulk of Iraq's untapped oil fields are located in either the predominantly Shiite south or the northern provinces controlled by the Kurdish nationalists. The Iraqi constitution, which was essentially composed by the US embassy to reward the Shiite and Kurdish parties for their support, gave control over new oil production to regional or provincial authorities. A Kurdish "region" already exists in the north and is claiming the right to negotiate contracts with oil corporations independently of Baghdad. Shiite parties are agitating for the formation of a southern region that would do the same. As part of its efforts to convince the Sunni establishment that they will also benefit from collaborating with the US occupation, Washington wants the constitution rewritten to give control over oil revenues to the central government.

The US has effectively given Maliki until September to meet its benchmarks. At that time, the Bush administration has stated it will provide Congress with an assessment of the success of the "surge" policy announced in January. The increase in US troop numbers in Iraq was justified with the claim it would provide the Iraqi government with enough time to achieve reconciliation.

Maliki has been unable to secure agreement from the various factions in the Iraqi parliament on any of the key US demands. Essentially, the US is demanding that Shiite and Kurdish parties agree to the erosion of their recently acquired power and privileges. Thus far, they have shown no signs of doing so. No legislation that meets the US benchmarks is even under consideration.

Shiite fundamentalists, including members of Maliki's own Da'wa Party and the leading Shiite cleric in Iraq, Ali Al-Sistani, are opposing any steps to rehabilitate the Baathists. The Shiite parties were brutally repressed under the previous regime and viewed the US overthrow of Hussein as their long-awaited opportunity to supplant the Sunni-dominated Iraqi state.

For their part, the Kurdish parties, having established a de-facto state in northern Iraq, are vehemently opposed to any constitutional changes that take away their regional control of oil production. They have also rejected demands to delay holding a referendum to decide if the oil-rich city of Kirkuk should be incorporated into the Kurdish Regional Government.

Further complicating Maliki's ability to meet the US

demands, 32 Shiite legislators loyal to the cleric Moqtada al-Sadr began a boycott of the Iraqi parliament last week in protest over the government's failure to protect the Al-Askariya mosque. For any valid vote, a quorum of at least half the 275 members of parliament must be present. The Sadrist bloc was one of the few that regularly attended sessions and made up the necessary numbers. Dozens of legislators spend most of the year outside Iraq due to security concerns. Others have been killed or have fled the country due to corruption charges.

The intransigence of Shiite and Kurdish opposition to the US demands is fueling a pervasive sense of crisis within both the Bush administration and the US military. In order to curb the insurgency, US commanders have been given the go ahead to negotiate truces with Sunni insurgents behind the back of Maliki's government. Sunni tribal heads have been given control of the western province of Anbar in exchange for calling off armed resistance. Efforts are underway to convince insurgents in the largely Sunni provinces of Salah Ad Din and Diyala to accept a similar arrangement.

Shiite politicians are objecting to a US policy that effectively places entire swathes of the country into the hands of their bitter enemies. An unnamed official of Maliki's government told the *Washington Post*: "They are forcing the Iraqi government and the Shia and the Kurds to reconcile with the Saddamists." Maliki has reportedly ordered the Iraqi military to treat the Sunni militia, with which US troops are arming and conducting joint patrols, as "outlaws".

For the Bush administration, the situation is becoming untenable. It cannot achieve what it wants through the Maliki government, but there is no political alternative within the Iraqi parliament. Efforts to develop a rival bloc around former interim prime minister Iyad Allawi have thus far come to very little. In such conditions, the US may well consider some form of coup.



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